Using the Cultural Web Model to Analyse Early-Career Research Culture

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Abstract

This Critical Reflection explores how Johnson and Scholes' 'Cultural Web' organisational model can be used to interrogate institutional research culture, with a particular focus on whether the needs and experiences of early-career researchers (ECRs) are as culturally complex as institutional discourse may imply. Drawing on engagement with over 200 ECRs across four UK universities and reflections from presentations at the 2025 International Research Culture Conference held at the University of Warwick, the paper explores the following question: Which aspects of institutional research culture impacting on the lived experiences of early-career researchers are genuinely complex, deeply embedded and resistant to change and which reflect tensions between well-understood researcher needs and established institutional priorities? It argues that ECR aspirations are largely straightforward and uncomplicated. The issue may lie in how these aspirations interact with institutional paradigms, power arrangements, reward systems and resource constraints. The paper is intended as a call to action, using the Cultural Web model to make visible the relationship between an institution's stated cultural ambitions and its organisational mechanisms through which particular research cultures are reproduced. In doing so, it argues for a more precise use of the language of complexity and for greater attention to the institutional choices and tensions that shape research culture and researchers' day-to-day experience.

Keywords: Johnson & Scholes; Cultural Web; research culture; Research Excellence Framework; REF; organisational culture

Introduction: Research culture and the 'Cultural Web'

The description and measurement of research culture continues to represent a key concern within higher education policy, institutional strategy, and academic discourse. Moran et al. **(2020)** describe 'research culture' as a multidimensional space in which researchers hold divergent, and sometimes incompatible, views shaped by multiple factors, including a potential disconnect between institutional strategy or policy and day-to-day experience. Institutional research cultures may be contested because different groups (e.g., late-, mid-, or early-career researchers) can hold differing views about what a positive culture should look and feel like (**Moran et al., 2020**).

At the 2025 International Research Culture Conference (IRCC25), held at the University of Warwick, discussions informing this critical reflection repeatedly described research culture(s) as complex, deeply embedded and resistant to change. That description has merit as research environments often involve multiple disciplines, roles, incentives and external pressures. However, treating complexity as a general explanation for slow progress can blur an important distinction between, on the one hand, genuinely difficult issues, and, on the other hand, cultural problems whose causes and potential remedies are already reasonably well understood. The central provocation of this paper is therefore not that research cultures are simple, but that the label 'complex' should be interrogated rather than accepted as a sufficient explanation for inaction.

Drawing on workshops and author engagement with over two hundred early-career researchers (ECRs) across four UK universities, as well as conversations held at IRCC25, this paper argues that there are areas within the research culture landscape that do not exemplify the degree of complexity often attributed to them. This is particularly apparent in ECR accounts of the conditions they need to thrive. If ECRs' needs are generally coherent and recognisable, then barriers to improving early-career research culture may arise not from complexity but from other factors, including tensions with long-standing institutional norms, hierarchies, performance metrics, resource models and managerial priorities.

To explore this tension, this paper adopts the Johnson and Scholes model of the 'Cultural Web'. Originally published by Johnson **(1988)** and later made popular by Scholes et al. **(2002)**, Johnson and Scholes' Cultural Web provides a structured means of examining the taken-for-granted assumptions that shape strategy, behaviour and decision-making. According to the Cultural Web model, an organisation's cultural paradigm is reproduced through six inter-related organisational mechanisms or 'elements': stories, symbols, rituals and routines, power structures, organisational structures and controls (Table 1). For Johnson **(1988)**, this

paradigm represents the 'core set of beliefs and assumptions that fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment; surfacing that which is taken for granted'.

*Table 1: Cultural Web elements (**Scholes et al., 2002**)*

Element of the Web	Description
The Stories People Tell	The narratives that people share about past events, individuals and successes that signal what the organisation values and considers important
Rituals and Routines	The established ways of working and repeated behaviours that demonstrate what is expected and considered acceptable
Symbols	The visible signs of culture, including language and physical or organisational artefacts that convey meaning about what is valued
Power Structures	The individuals or groups with the greatest influence over decisions, priorities and resources, whether through formal authority or informal influence
Organisational structures	The formal and informal arrangements, roles, hierarchies and relationships that shape how work is organised and how people interact
Control Systems	The measures, incentives, performance processes and reward mechanisms that reinforce which behaviours and outcomes are valued

While developed primarily as a tool for understanding organisational strategy and change, the Cultural Web's emphasis on both visible practices and less explicit assumptions makes it particularly applicable for an analysis of research culture in higher-education institutions (HEIs) in order to move beyond abstract calls for cultural change and towards a more grounded critique of how research cultures are actively reproduced and could be meaningfully reshaped. Interventions such as revised promotion criteria, training programmes and wellbeing initiatives can be valuable, but the Cultural Web directs attention to whether such interventions are reinforced by the wider organisational paradigm, routines, power structures and control systems (**Scholes, et al., 2002**). Where these

elements remain misaligned, formal initiatives may have limited effect on researchers' lived experiences.

Data used to support the conclusions of this reflection come primarily from consultancy work with four UK universities who were each seeking recommended actions to improve the lived experience of their early-career researchers. Data was collected via a series of cross-disciplinary workshops featuring more than two hundred ECRs, primarily postdoctoral researchers. Using questions framed around the six elements of the Cultural Web, the workshops explored the current ('as-is') experience of ECRs and what a successful research culture would look like. Across all four universities, researchers described gaps between formal aspirations and lived experience and the importance of support, recognition, career development, networking and day-to-day working conditions. In all workshops participants detailed positive experiences as uneven and dependent on local teams or individual supervisors. These observations suggest that informal practices can shape a particular institutional research culture as powerfully as formal policy.

Research Culture through the Lens of the Cultural Web

Johnson **(1988)** emphasises that by making the six elements of organisational culture explicit, organisational culture can be challenged and changed. In academic research environments specifically, reward and control systems are influenced by factors such as funding, performance measures and professional norms; power is distributed through formal roles and informal influence; and routines signal which activities are genuinely prioritised. The analytical task of the Cultural Web is to examine how these mechanisms combine, rather than to assume that any single interest or system explains their cultural persistence (**Johnson, 1988**; **Scholes et al., 2002**).

From the perspective adopted here, research-culture change is consequently both a cultural and a governance challenge. Measurement frameworks and cultural audits can support diagnosis, but they do not by themselves resolve questions about priorities, accountability or trade-offs. Addressing issues such as hyper-competition, precarious employment or inequitable recognition can require difficult choices related to resources, incentives, workload and authority which impact on the lived experiences of ECRs. Some tensions between researchers and research institutions may be genuinely difficult to reconcile. For example, ECRs may seek security, autonomy and broader recognition while institutions operate within short-term funding arrangements and performance systems that reward flexibility and measurable outputs. The issue is therefore not

simply whether institutions 'understand' research culture, but how they govern and negotiate these competing priorities.

Applied to academic research, the Cultural Web enables systematic examination of how a particular research culture is enacted and sustained. For example, stories about academic success may privilege grant income, publication volume and institutional prestige; promotion rounds, peer review processes and workload models can reinforce these signals; and formal and informal power structures shape whose voices influence research priorities and resource allocation. Taken together, such patterns might point to a central paradigm in which research excellence is assumed to be demonstrated primarily through competitive achievement, measurable outputs and reputation. The value of the Cultural Web framework lies in examining whether the six elements of the web consistently reinforce such assumptions or whether they pull in different directions (**Scholes et al., 2002**). The Cultural Web therefore provides a practical way to compare espoused intentions with enacted organisational practice and impact. (In this context, 'impact' means the lived consequences of policies and cultural initiatives for researchers rather than simply whether an initiative has been implemented.)

The framework does not eliminate the complexity of institutional research culture, nor does this paper seek to redefine research culture as a straight-forward concept. Instead, it seeks to distinguish between different sources of complexity and identify areas—such as the articulated needs of ECRs—where the cultural requirements may be comparatively clear even when implementation remains difficult. By adopting the Cultural Web as a central analytical device, it suggests that research cultures can be described in simpler terms, thus seeking to counter those narratives that present the institutional inability to improve research culture as resulting from its inherent complexity.

IRCC2025 Narratives on Research Culture

IRCC2025 offered a rich snapshot of contemporary thinking on research culture in the higher-education sector. Across the conference, presentations, panels and facilitated discussions repeatedly presented research culture as complex and multifaceted. Presenters emphasised inclusion, collaboration, wellbeing, ethical practice, psychological safety, leadership behaviour and open dialogue as core components of a healthy research environment. One of the strongest metaphors used to describe research culture compared it to a Rubik's cube: difficult, multi-dimensional, but ultimately solvable.

While such metaphors serve an important communicative function, they also risk reinforcing the idea that research culture is inherently convoluted and therefore resistant to decisive intervention. The framing of research culture as a tangled or multi-layered problem may unintentionally normalise inertia. Notably absent from many of the discussions was sustained interrogation of *why* certain cultural patterns persist despite widespread recognition of their negative impact. Issues such as research precarity, inequitable recognition and hyper-competition were acknowledged yet rarely framed as outcomes of specific institutional choices or power arrangements that should be challenged.

One of the most striking features of the conference discourse was the near-universal emphasis on psychological safety as the cornerstone of a positive research culture. Across multiple sessions, psychological safety was positioned as enabling open dialogue, inclusion of diverse voices, mentoring, innovation and the surfacing of systemic barriers. However, while it was consistently presented as essential, there was comparatively little discussion of the structural conditions that may undermine it, including power asymmetries, performance regimes, funding dependencies and employment insecurity. Framed through the Cultural Web, psychological safety can be understood as both an aspiration and a visible symbol of the desired culture; yet it may struggle to become routine if control systems, power structures and dominant success narratives pull in a different direction. This raises an important critical question: Can psychological safety be cultivated consistently without also examining the paradigms governing reward, risk and reputation in academic life? The conference discourse was strongly aspirational, but a Cultural Web reading suggests that the relationship between psychological safety and structural conditions warrants deeper interrogation.

Leadership behaviour emerged as another dominant theme, with presenters emphasising that cultural change depends less on formal strategies and more on how leaders act day-to-day. Authenticity, consistency and visible support were repeatedly cited as critical, alongside calls for open and continuous dialogue with research communities. However, this framing tended to individualise responsibility for cultural change. The emphasis on how leaders behave can obscure the extent to which leaders are themselves embedded within institutional paradigms and incentive systems. Leadership agency matters, but so too does the role leaders play in maintaining or challenging promotion criteria, resource allocation practices and accepted ways of working.

Similarly, persistent dialogue and engagement were framed as inherently transformative, with phrases such as ‘just keep talking’ suggesting that cultural change will emerge organically through conversation. While

dialogue is undeniably important, without mechanisms that translate it into structural change, it risks becoming performative, another ritual within the Cultural Web of the institution that signals openness while leaving underlying assumptions intact.

A further recurring narrative positioned research culture as moving away from output-driven models towards a more holistic, human-centred approach. Contributors emphasised valuing diverse forms of research activity, recognising invisible labour and focusing on societal impact rather than narrow quantitative metrics. This rhetoric sits in tension with the continued prominence of metrics-driven systems within higher education. From a Cultural Web perspective, that tension may indicate a misalignment between espoused values and existing control systems. At the conference it was more often treated as a transitional challenge than explored as a possible conflict between underlying paradigms, perhaps reflecting the practical difficulty of reconciling human-centred aspirations with established funding and performance arrangements.

Taken collectively, the conference narratives reveal a research culture that is highly articulate about the many features that define it positively, yet less so about the institutional assumptions and issues that may sustain less-desirable research practices. The discourse also shows a reluctance to connect acknowledged problems consistently to power arrangements, reward systems and organisational choices through which particular research cultures are reproduced. This analysis suggests that presenting research cultures as inherently complex can function as a discursive shield even without conscious intent, allowing institutions to acknowledge problems while leaving their origins, trade-offs and consequences insufficiently examined. The Cultural Web provides a useful framework for moving from description towards interrogation of the mechanisms through which culture is reproduced.

Early-Career Researchers' Articulated Needs

In conference discussions, research culture was repeatedly described as diffuse, multi-faceted and resistant to change. The cross-disciplinary workshops held for more than two hundred early-career researchers at four UK universities offer a useful counterpoint, not because they demonstrate that research culture as a whole is simple, but because they show that one important part of the landscape can be comparatively coherent. Throughout these workshops, ECRs expressed strikingly similar views about the conditions they need in order to thrive, articulating remarkably consistent aspirations across disciplines and different academic roles and circumstances. These included financial security,

protected time for research and professional development, transparent pathways to progression, access to mentoring and networks and recognition as individuals rather than interchangeable units of labour. While their longer-term goals varied from academic careers to industry, entrepreneurship or portfolio careers, the cultural conditions they associated with positive experience were broadly shared.

This consistency is significant given the diversity of perspectives identified. Some participants viewed their current role as a stepping stone to academic tenure; others described research as a way of life. Some anticipated careers beyond academia, while others envisaged niche or hybrid careers with research as a backbone. Despite these differences, their core needs converged around a small number of foundational conditions: security, respect, autonomy, clarity and belonging.

This convergence cannot and should not be generalised to research culture in its entirety. However, it does suggest that ECR expectations regarding a positive research culture are more coherent and straight-forward than the language of 'complex and multifaceted' may imply. The complexity may arise at the point where ECR expectations meet other institutional and sector priorities—for example, where demands for security, autonomy or broad recognition conflict with short-term funding, workload pressures or output-based performance systems. In this sense, the question shifts from 'What do ECRs need?' to 'What tensions prevent ECR needs from being delivered consistently?'

One of the most telling findings from these ECR workshops was the repeated use of the word 'luck' when participants described positive research culture experiences. Supportive supervisors, manageable workloads, access to development opportunities and flexible working arrangements were framed as fortunate exceptions rather than dependable features of the research environment. I refer to this pattern as 'cultural inconsistency', where comparable researchers can experience markedly different cultural norms, support and opportunities depending on local teams, supervisors or circumstances even within the same institutional setting.

Through the Cultural Web model, 'luck' can be interpreted as a story that helps normalise this variability. If positive experience is narrated as the result of encountering the 'right' supervisor or team, responsibility can shift away from institutional systems towards individual circumstance. The engagement carried out with early-career researchers indicated that examples of positive research culture did exist but were localised rather than consistently embedded through elements of the Cultural Web such as shared routines or control systems. The prevalence of the 'luck' narrative matters because it shows that participants could recognise and

describe good research culture when they encountered it. The problem was not an inability to identify positive practice, but its uneven availability. As such, the use of 'luck' leads to a consideration of why recognised good practice has not been made more predictable, portable and institutionally supported.

Likewise, ECRs consistently identified a small number of structural stressors as inhibitors of a positive research culture: precarious employment, unrealistic workload expectations, opaque progression criteria and limited autonomy over research direction. Participants linked these factors to stress, reduced wellbeing and constrained creativity. These are not culturally mysterious phenomena; they relate to organisational choices and external constraints concerning funding, employment contracts, workload and performance measurement. This is also where genuine complexity may reside; ECR aspirations for security, autonomy and recognition can conflict with institutional needs for financial flexibility, competitive performance and short-term delivery. Recognising that tension is more analytically useful than treating 'complexity' as an undifferentiated characteristic of research culture.

A further theme emerging from engagement with ECRs was the desire for recognition beyond narrow research outputs. ECRs expressed frustration that contributions such as mentoring, teaching innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, equality and inclusion work and public engagement were routinely undervalued despite being celebrated rhetorically in institutional strategies. Where symbols and formal narratives may celebrate mentoring, collaboration, inclusion and public engagement, systems of control continue to reward a narrower set of measurable outputs. The resulting inconsistency is diagnostically useful: it identifies where cultural aspirations are not yet reinforced by the systems that allocate recognition, resources or progression. The misalignment between espoused values and enacted reward systems can be examined directly through the paradigm of the Cultural Web (Table 2).

Perhaps the most powerful challenge to the 'too complex' narrative lies in the articulation of a credible alternative paradigm. ECRs were able to describe in concrete terms what positive research culture would look like: shared spaces for collaboration, supportive leadership behaviours, streamlined processes, family-friendly practices and rituals that reinforce belonging and mutual support. These descriptions were not speculative; rather, they built on existing pockets of good practice already operating within institutions. Their partial and uneven implementation further undermines claims of impossibility. If elements of a positive research culture already exist, the question becomes not whether culture can be changed, but why it has not been systematised.

Table 2: Research culture needs described by ECRs, mapped to Johnson & Scholes' Cultural Web model

Element	ECR needs
The Paradigm (the 'way we do things around here')	• To feel valued as individuals, not as 'resources' or 'outputs' • To be recognised as legitimate researchers in their own right • To experience research as sustainable, meaningful and human-centred • To believe that multiple career pathways are valid and respected
The Stories People Tell (what the organisation/ individuals choose to talk about)	• Transparent narratives about career progression and expectations • Honest accounts of failure, experimentation, and 'non-linear' careers • Recognition of diverse contributions • Removal of 'luck' as the dominant explanatory story
Rituals and Routines (how things are done day to day)	• Protected time for research, development and networking • Regular mentoring and peer-support forums • Consistent induction and transition support • Predictable access to training and collaboration opportunities
Symbols (visible signals of what is valued)	• Dedicated collaborative spaces and shared infrastructure • Visible investment in ECR development • Recognition that does not privilege seniority alone • Physical and digital environments that foster belonging
Power Structures (who really makes decisions)	• A voice in decisions affecting research priorities and culture • Reduced dependency on single Principal Investigators • Safe mechanisms to challenge poor behaviour • Transparent governance processes
Organisational Structures (formal roles and reporting lines)	• Clear career pathways and role definitions • Alignment between research, teaching and service expectations • Reduced fragmentation between faculties and disciplines • Structures that enable mobility and collaboration
Control Systems (what is measured, rewarded and sanctioned)	• Fair workload allocation • Recognition of diverse contributions • Transparent progression criteria • Reduced over-reliance on narrow metrics • Call-out of negative behaviours irrespective of where these exist

Conclusion

Reframed through the Cultural Web, the question at the heart of this paper therefore becomes more precise. While the evidence does *not* show that research culture as a whole is straight-forward, it *does* show that ECR needs can be articulated with considerable clarity. Meeting those needs, however, is complicated by institutional paradigms: the challenge here is to distinguish complexity that genuinely requires new forms of problem-solving and negotiation from complexity invoked as a smokescreen for a lack of commitment to addressing well-understood cultural problems.

A persistent theme in the IRCC2025 discourse was that research culture is multi-faceted and difficult to change. Mapping the ECR needs identified here onto the Cultural Web model produces a more differentiated picture.

While it does not prove that improving research culture is a simple task, it does demonstrate that ECR expectations can be organised around a clear set of cultural levers. When mapped systematically, the ECR needs identified align with each element of the Cultural Web. This provides a proof of concept for the framework as a diagnostic device, translating experience into identifiable questions about paradigms, stories, routines, symbols, power, structures and controls (**Johnson, 1988**; **Scholes et al., 2002**).

The implication is not that problematic research cultures can be attributed solely to institutional reluctance. Some tensions are structural and genuinely difficult, particularly where researcher aspirations conflict with funding models, performance regimes or resource constraints. However, the mapping makes those tensions more explicit and therefore more open to governance, prioritisation and deliberate choice. Complexity becomes something to specify and examine, rather than a catch-all explanation.

The desired conditions for research culture described by ECRs are comparatively legible: security, respect, autonomy, clarity, recognition and belonging. The central challenge is whether institutions can align the elements of the Cultural Web sufficiently to make those conditions consistent rather than contingent on local circumstance or 'luck'. The value of the Cultural Web is therefore not that it simplifies research culture, but that it helps identify where cultural aspirations, institutional paradigms and organisational systems reinforce or contradict one another.

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